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DE RUEHLB #1623/01 2901403

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P 171403Z OCT 07

FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9752

INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE

RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE

RUEHROV/AMEMBASSY VATICAN 0762

RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO 1723

RHMFISS/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL

RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001623

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/GAVITO/YERGER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/15/2017

TAGS: PGOV PREL LE

SUBJECT: LEBANON: "CHANGE AOUN" URGES GREEK ORTHODOX ARCHBISHOP

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Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).
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SUMMARY

¶11. (C) Greek Orthodox Archbishop Elias Audi is worried about March 8 and March 14's inability to date to find a solution to the presidential election impasse. He believes the key to a solution lies in a shift in General Michel Aoun's thinking, which begs the question, who is most suitable to influence Aoun? Surprising us, Audi suggested Marada leader Suleiman Franjieh for that role because, despite his friendship with Syria's Asad family, he is "deep-down, a Maronite" and is perceived to be influential with Aoun. While polite about a fellow cleric, Audi expressed unmistakable concern about the lack of leadership exercised by Maronite Patriarch Sfeir. In Audi's view, Sfeir should be viewing the presidency from a broader, Christian-wide perspective rather than thinking only about the Maronites. Audi said that, in his view, Nassib Lahoud or Charles Rizk would be the best president, but neither will be elected if Sfeir does not take stronger positions. As for Lebanon's biggest challenge, Audi cited Iran and Hizballah. End Summary.

THE NEED TO SHIFT AOUN

¶12. (C) The Ambassador, accompanied by PolOff, met with Archbishop Elias Audi, Metropolitan for the Orthodox Archdiocese of Beirut, on October 15. The Ambassador asked about three probable scenarios regarding the elections: 1) a consensus is reached, albeit with the danger that a presumably Syrian-selected president is chosen; 2) March 14 moves forward with a half plus one majority; or 3) no president is elected and the status quo continues until March 14's majority is weakened. Audi believes all of these are very bad and difficult options for Lebanon, adding, "If (General Michel) Aoun sticks to his dream (of becoming president), there will be no solution." Audi's own dream is for Aoun to "turn a bit around" and give up on his presidential aspirations, saying, "The situation will change if Aoun changes."

HOW TO SHIFT THE GENERAL

¶13. (C) But how to turn Aoun around? Audi suggested that if

Aoun internalizes Lebanon's dire need for a president chosen freely by Lebanese, then maybe he will give up his personal aspirations. Audi wondered if Aoun is so focused on his own candidacy that he fails to realize Hizballah has its own plans, its own regime, and is using him. Audi recommends that someone work on Aoun to convince him of his own role in the current deadlock and to make an appeal for the future of the Christians. The Ambassador noted that the Embassy is in regular touch with Aoun's MPs and advisors.

WHO CAN SWAY AOUN

¶ 14. (C) Audi expressed skepticism over the ability of Aoun's aides to appeal to Aoun, citing tension between Audi and Aoun's aides when Audi criticized in a sermon the Aoun bloc's support for the downtown tent city protest. He mentioned there are three MPs who unconditionally support Aoun, and then there is MP Michel Murr, who is close to Aoun but may not always follow him. However Audi rejected the Ambassador's inquiry about the utility of Murr in influencing Aoun, saying Murr was a pro-Syrian and opportunist during the civil war and therefore is not completely trustworthy.

¶ 15. (C) Instead -- to our astonishment -- Audi recommended former minister and ex-MP Suleiman Franjieh, leader of the Marada movement, as the best person to sway Aoun. Noting our surprise, Audi expressed his appreciation for the Ambassador having met with Franjieh in the past. Audi argued that, while Franjieh is close to Syrian president Bashar al-Asad, he can be counted on to put the interests of the Maronite community at the forefront. Franjieh's relationship with the Asads is based in his personal history (with the Asads having informally adopted him after Franjieh's family was murdered, when Franjieh was a boy). But, putting that relationship aside, Franjieh is also a Maronite from the Maronite

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stronghold of Zghorta and he has genuine Maronite following. Repeating that Franjieh had Maronite weight that others close to Aoun lack, Audi added that Franjieh has a "big heart" and is a dedicated Maronite.

PLEASED WITH BKIRKI MEETINGS

¶ 16. (C) Audi remarked that he was happy with the October 11 and 12 meetings held by Patriarch Sfeir with Christian political leaders because they created small waves of progress. He said that Franjieh was hesitant to attend the meeting with Sfeir, so his deciding finally to attend, with Aoun, was a positive step. Rejecting the suggestion that the Patriarch refrain from receiving those who disregard his calls (on removing tents and not boycotting Parliament), Audi again asserted that, "The keys are in the hands of Aoun, if he chooses to use them." He believes that Aoun would concede the presidency to someone else if there were a two-thirds majority in favor of that other person.

LESS PLEASED WITH THE PATRIARCH

¶ 17. (C) Pressed by the Ambassador about whether Patriarch Sfeir could be doing more to see that a president is elected, Audi paused. Choosing his words carefully and adding lots of caveat about his respect for the Patriarch, Audi mused that his Maronite colleague is as enamored with media attention as he is with a solution that could lower the spotlight focused upon him. Audi also lamented that Sfeir views Lebanon's presidency through a purely Maronite perspective. The president is important for all Christians in Lebanon, Audi said, suggesting that the Patriarch should be exercising leadership by convoking all of Lebanon's Christian hierarchy, not simply the Maronites, to Bkirk. The Patriarch views the presidency too narrowly and is suspicious of those other Christian religious leaders, like Audi, who could help solve

the problem. Audi rebuffed the Ambassador's suggestion that he go to Bkirki on his own to speak with the Patriarch. On those occasions when Audi has gone to Bkirki, the Patriarch has listened but not given substantive responses. (Comment: We know the feeling. End comment.)

AUDI'S PICK: NASSIB LAHOUD AND CHARLES RIZK

¶8. (C) Audi revealed that, in his view, the two best candidates for president are Nassib Lahoud and Minister of Justice Charles Rizk. Both have proven to be courageous and independent, Audi said. But Nassib is opposed by pro-Syrians; Rizk (because of his work on the Special Tribunal) by Syria itself. The only way to get either elected, Audi speculated, was for Maronite Patriarch Sfeir to exercise leadership and help make it happen. Audi did not believe that would happen.

IRAN AND HIZBALLAH: LEBANON'S BIGGEST PROBLEMS

¶9. (C) Audi also revealed that what he fears most in Lebanon's political sphere is growing, seemingly irreversible Hizballah power and Iranian influence. Hizballah and Iran wish to change Lebanon, he said. The Sunnis have finally "discovered that they are Lebanese" (as opposed to previous allegiances to the greater "Arab nation"), just as Hizballah and Iran are busily dismantling the vestiges of Lebanon. Audi agreed with the Ambassador that, to start reversing this trend, Lebanon's next president could not come to power because of Hizballah blessing alone.

COMMENT

¶10. (C) In this meeting as previously, Bishop Audi displayed a perceptible tilt in the direction of March 14 rather than March 8. This was especially true in his worries about Hizballah and Iran. In this regard, Bishop Audi sounded a now-familiar chord: that it is easier (or, more accurately, slightly less impossible) to get Michel Aoun on board for a credible president than to get Hizballah or Amal buy-in. But his suggestion was bizarre that we attempt to approach Aoun via Suleiman Franjieh, a personal friend of Bashar al-Assad. There seems to be an attempt currently

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underway by many parties to rehabilitate Franjieh, whose close relations with Damascus so discredited him that he did not even attempt to defend his Zghorta parliamentary seat in ¶2005.

¶11. (C) We agree with Audi that Franjieh has important Maronite weight by virtue of the genuine popular support he enjoys in northern Lebanon, and we will continue to deal with him (albeit infrequently, with our last visit to him in February). But we would be very surprised if Franjieh has any more influence on Michel Aoun than others do. If Michel Aoun does not listen to Maronite Patriarch Sfeir about showing up for the parliamentary session, why would he listen to Franjieh to step aside to allow a consensus presidential candidate to win?

FELTMAN